

Footloose in Santa Barbara

Story and Photos by Barbara Beckley



AVA Santa Barbara wine tasting room in the trendy Funk Zone

“You’re doing great! Now ... stand up!” Nathan Weber’s supportive words made it sound so simple. I was on my knees. On a stand-up paddle board. Floating in the middle of Santa Barbara Harbor.

Summoning my childhood ballerina balance, I slowly raised my hips; then lifted my paddle. Woo hoo! I was standing tall. Dipping my paddle into the water, I began gliding across the harbor, feeling as cool as every paddle-boarder looks with the blue sky above and Santa Barbara’s red tile roofs gleaming on the shore.

This was my first try at SUP (stand-up paddle boarding). A 90-minute lesson/tour with Santa Barbara Fitness Tours and instructor Weber. SUP originated in Santa Barbara, so the story goes. I’d watched a lesson in progress from my beachfront room at the stylish Hotel Milo the day before and couldn’t resist the opportunity.

Following Weber across the mirror-smooth waters, I floated around beautiful yachts, under four small bridges, low enough that I had to duck, and passed the rocky breakwater where harbor seals and sea lions dozed and pelicans nosed dived for food. “Should we go under?” I teased as we approached a large catamaran tied up at a dock. I was kidding. But Weber said most guests do paddle underneath one of its high-rise double-hulls (with

the owner’s permission). It was magical. Like a blue grotto with the clear water reflecting off the white hull.

It was smooth sailing as we paddled across the channel and rounded Stearns Wharf heading back to the beach and the shallow water, until – whoops! I wobbled and splashed down into the surf – ruining my perfect stand-up record. But not my enthusiasm. “All the more reason to do it again,” Weber agreed.

From the splash of the surf to the splash of wine in the glass was an easy transition. Santa Barbara

County has more than 175 wineries and the city’s self-guided Urban Wine Trail features nearly 100 varietals at more than 30 downtown tasting rooms.

After my SUP lesson, I walked over to the Deep Sea wine tasting room on Stearns Wharf. It’s probably the world’s only serious wine-tasting establishment on an ocean pier, and easily the best wine-tasting views ever, with 360-degree views of the coast, Santa Barbara and the ocean. I enjoyed six generous pours of blended and estate-bottled Conway Family Wines and conversation with delightful fellow visitors and wine enthusiasts.

I followed the wine trail from the pier two blocks into the Funk Zone, Santa Barbara’s once industrial enclave and now trendy go-to for wine tasting and dining. Eleven wine-tasting rooms all within easy walking distance of each other, and all serving hefty portions of fine vintages, added a cocktail party comradery (usually not associated with this town) to the afternoon, as I and other enthusiasts chatted with one another at one spot and then ran into each other again at another. I began my Funk Zone tastings at AVA Santa Barbara. It serves small-batch wines from each of the county’s five grape growing regions. Then went around the corner to Kunin Wines, sat at the bar in what had been the living room

continued on page 9

continued from page 8



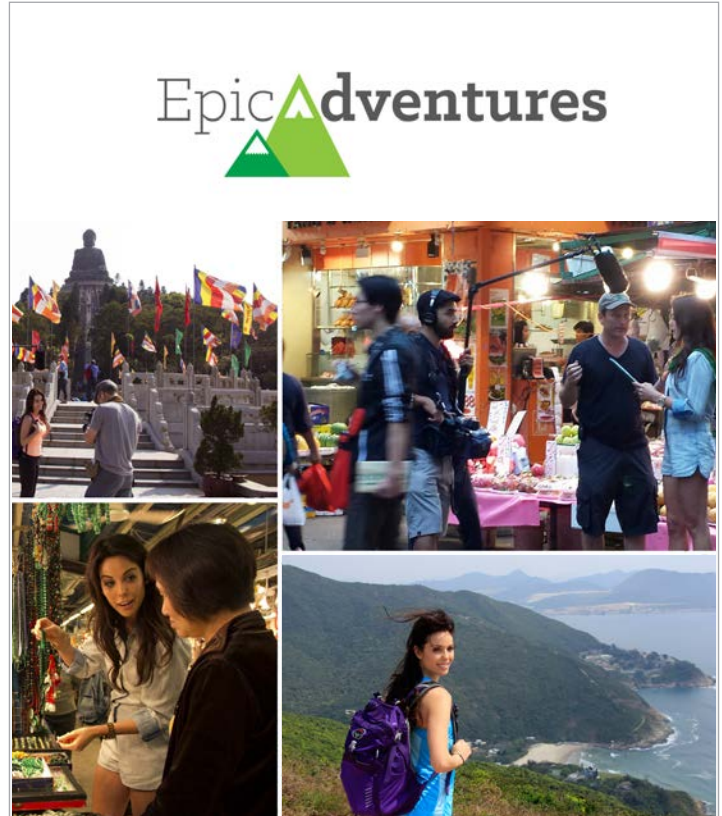
Barbara learns to Stand Up Paddle Board

of an early 20th century bungalow and sampled tasty Viogniers, Syrahs and Zinfandels.

The Riverbench Winery room looked interesting. “We’re the only tasting room with champagne (sparkling wine because it’s from California) flights,” the server said. Lucky me. The five flights of bubbly was a perfect send-off for my walk back along the beach to dinner at Toma Restaurant and Bar on the waterfront. The locals have been raving about its excellent Mediterranean Italian cuisine and wine list since it opened in 2013. My gnocchi with rock fish and truffle butter was as good as they said.

I’d planned more wine tasting the next day, but was waylaid by the Salt caves. Descending into a basement spa on State Street, I soon found myself laying on a chaise lounge in a manmade cavern covered with 45 tons of 250 million-year-old pure Himalayan salt. Soothing music played, amber-colored light glowed through gigantic salt crystals and I simply relaxed and breathed in the salty air. “This salt balances your energy and lifts your spirits,” Shane Chunesphisal, the Salt therapist, told me. Back above ground, the energetic Tuesday Farmers Market was in full swing. Friends pointed out local celebrity mixologist Patrick Reynolds, who was purchasing greens and fruits for his “farm-to-bar” handcrafted cocktails, served every Tuesday at the Wildcat Lounge, an off-State-Street watering hole. “Mmm...who knew an arugula martini could be so tasty.” It was a perfect finish to a perfect Santa Barbara adventure.

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